[Mr. Gill]

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1 Conn. 1938-9 KNIFEMAKER [?] MR. GILL.

Almost at the top of the long hill lined on either side with old fashioned frame dwellings in good and bad repair that constitutes Northfield's Main Street is the home of Henry Gill, who conducts as a one man industry the once flourishing Northfield Knife Company. Mr. Gill's big white house bears evidence of care and attention. Its paint is new, roof tightly shingled, front and side verandahs neat and shining. Over the front door is the date of erection, “1836”. Flanking the house is a two car garage on one side and on the other the shop itself, a long, narrow, one storied wooden building, white painted, many windowed.

Mr. Gill is not at home, but Mrs. Gill is sure he'll be back shortly “if you care to wait,” and not long afterwards he enters the yard of the premises, surprisingly enough, as a passenger on a fire truck. This venerable vehicle, it turns out, has been purchased only recently by the citizenry after virtually 150 years of indifferent fire protection, and the village as a whole and members of the newly organized department in particular experience a glow of pardonable pride every time it chugs up Main Street. The body and hood of the truck have been newly painted in brilliant scarlet, and in large gilt lettering over the engine is the legend, “Northfield Fire Department Number One.” (Number Two, it should be explained, is at this stage purely a matter of wishful thinking.)

Mr. Gill alights from his porch which in considerably higher than is considered fashionable these days—the truck being a Maxim of obvious maturity despite its brave new color—and opens the garage doors while the driver, a plump young man, hatless and curly haired, steers carefully inside. The tires need air, it appears, and Mr. Gill has an electric pump which is at the disposal of the department.

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“How many you think she'll take, Herby?” asks Mr. Gill as the driver unscrews the valve. “About 45,” says Herby, applying the pump. Mr. Gill turns to me inquiringly 2 and I make known my business.

“Well,” he says, “if I had the time today, I could got you some data. I got some stuff in the ' ouse there. I got all the medals that were won at the World's Fairs, seven of 'em in all, and I got records down at the old shop. You see I kind of take care of that for the state, now. And all the records are there. But I couldn't get at 'em today.

“Would you like to see the little shop?” I answer affirmatively and Mr. Gill leads the way, talking fluently. His aitches are noticeably absent and he tells me that his father was one of the old “Sheffield Knifemakers” and that he himself was taken to Sheffield as a small boy by his father, both returning later to this country.

“My father said he wanted to take me over there so he could properly show me the knife trade, but I think to tell you the truth he just wanted an excuse to go back.” We enter the little shop, the interior of which is literally cluttered with old machinery, presses, drop hammers, forges, benches, wheels, boxes of stock, drawers, cupboards, belts, arranged in what is apparently a semblance of order to Mr. Gill, but confusing to the layman.

An ancient hand forge has been placed near the entrance and upon it is a most curious hammer, the haft polished smooth with long usage, the head—massive though it is, worn rough with the striking of countless blows. But its peculiarity lies in its shape, the head bent sharply downwards and in towards the haft instead of in the contentional fashion.

“That,” says Mr. Gill, “is a knifemaker's hammer, and the things they could do with that tool you probably wouldn't believe unless you saw them. It's old, at least a 'undred years and maybe more, that hammer is. Like all the stuff I got 'ere. I got the remnants of four knife companies 'ere. Four of the best companies in Connecticut, employin' between 'em

nearly two thousand 'ands. And 3 this," (Mr. Grill looks around the little room with a kind of melancholy pride,) "is all that's left."

"If I 'ad the time I'd make up a knife for you right from the beginning, just to show you how it's done. I don't know whether I was fortunate or not, but I was of an inquiring turn of mind when I was a youngster and I wasn't satisfied till I learned all there was to know about the trade. There was about five principal operations to the knifemaking business. Bladers, forgers, grinders, cutlers, and finishers.

"Now this 'ammer 'ere. It was made this way so as to push the metal, instead of flatten it. And look 'ere," indicating the forge, "the metal is sweating. That's a sign of rain. A barometer. "Beads of moisture are noticeable on the forge, and on some of the other old machinery. "Don't ask me to explain it," says Mr. Gill.

"I bought out this stuff in 1930 and moved it up 'ere. I don't do much, and it gets less every year. You might say it's more of a hobby with me. The most business I've done in any one year was about eleven hundred dollars. Last year I did something like two 'undred and seventy five. And after I'd paid my 'elp and paid my taxes and so forth I 'ad just five dollars left to show for my year's work. So you see I don't got nothing out of it. I got old George Wright up at the top of the ['ill?] 'ere when I've any work. He's one of the old knifemakers. One of the few that's left around 'ere.

"This 'ere building is the original knife shop that was established in 1858. The lumber that's in this building is the lumber that was in the old knife shop; and the windows and doors and all.

"I was superintendent of the old placewhen the Clark Brothers owned it, and for a while after it went into receivership, and then when they discontinued the operations there the state took it over and they sort of had me look after it. But in 1930 I put up this building here and moved up the machinery and stock. All this 4 stuff that's in 'ere at one time would

'ave brought eighty thousand dollars. That's what it was valued at. Remnants of four knife shops.

“Look 'ere,” Mr. Gill reaches under a bench, brings out a small, but heavy die. “Now it used to take a man all day to make up one of these. And 'e might 'ave to do two or three of them for one knife. I could make you a knife if you was to draw a design on paper for me. Just from lookin' at it. And so could any good knifemaker.

“Come 'ere, I want to show you what old man Wright does.” Mr. Gill takes out of a box one of the smallest of knife blades, the type used in knives of the watch charm variety, “He grinds these with his fingers, old man Wright does. Does it all by guesswork. Would you believe that? And it comes out perfect. And he fashions them with that big hammer there by the door, these little blades! See that swage there? Done with the hammer. And these and all the others made 'ere are from rod steel from England. I got a couple of tons of it down in my cellar.

“There's six thousand dozen blades 'ere, all shapes and sizes. If I say it myself, the knives I make are knives. They'll cut. You buy these things they sell in a ten cent store and see how good they are.

“The knife business was ruined by the machine age. The machine age and borrowing money. Those are the two evils of the times. They got hammering them out in mass production, and cheapening them more and more, and they forced all the little fellows out, like our little company.

“Machines, machines, machines, and more production, and no equalization, so that the ones that want to buy can't buy—you've got a terrible problem there. All these little businesses, that started up in through 'ere, like this one, what's become of them? They've gone down, like this one, or they've grown out of proportion and are a dead weight. Top heavy. Like the automobile industry.

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“There's a business that's got away from them and they can't control it. It's 5 responsible for a lot of bad things, say what you've a mind to. And the airplane. This world would be better off if the Wright brothers had never drawn breath of life. A toy, you might say, in the hands of children. Vicious children.

“I've lived my life, most of it, and I don't give a damn, in a way, but I 'ate to think of what's in store for my children and my grandchildren. Things can't go on this way. There's goin' to be some kind of an up'eaval, everything points to it.

“I honestly believe, young man, that I lived through the best period this country ever saw, or ever will see. There'll never be a return to it, without some vast change. There'll be a lowerin' of the standard of livin', maybe. A return to where it used to be. 'Ow can this country continue to compete with countries like Japan, where they pay about seven cents a day for labor? Or Germany and Italy where it ain't much better.

“I can remember when things were much simpler 'ere, and it seems to me people were 'appy. They were secure, at least, and they know if they lost a job they could get another somewhere, if they were willing to work. Not that way today.

“'Ow much do you think those 'ouses cost across the street there, when they was put up, back in the sixties? The company 'ouses? Exactly four 'undred dollars apiece. They didn't 'ave the porches on like they 'ave now, nor anything fancy, but they were good solid little 'ouses. They rented for about six dollars a month. You 'ave to pay about two thousand for a 'ouse like that today.

“It was a 'ard life, maybe, in lots of ways, but it was 'ealthy, too. My father walked, one time, from Canton, o'io, to Southington. What do you think of that? There wasn't any 'itch 'ikin'. He walked all the way.

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“They didn't make much in the shop, but they got by on it. Families with two or three or four or five children. I've seen women working in this 'ere knife factory 6 for four cents an hour. Setting edges and cleaning knives and that.

“The old time knifemakers worked on piecework, and they made pretty good money, as pay went in those days, but the important thing was their trade. The state was full of knife factories, and they could always get a job. That gave 'em security. And they'd work till they were so old they had to be helped down to the factory and set in their chairs. They took pride in their work, and the consequences was they did wonderful work. Do you see that today? A man can't take pride in it, if everything is done by machinery.

“So they saved and they scrimped and some of them bought farms and their own houses. They know how to do without things, which is something the young folks don't know today. You went up to see old man Wright, you say? Well, you didn't see any electric lights up there did you? Or any vacuum cleaners or things like that? No / sir, the Wrights burn oil lamps. But they're not on relief. They know how to live within their means. They never will be on relief.

“Look at the road out there. I can remember when it was so deep in mud this time the year, you'd go over your ankles. But now it's macadam surface, and if there's three inches of snow on it, the state plow 'as to clear it off. We've got to pay for that, 'aven't we, one way or the other. Things are getting away from us.

“I couldn't keep this business goin', if I was to depend on it for a livin'. Fortunately, I'm independent of it. It's a lobby with me, more than anything else. Well, if you come around some other day, I'll try and 'ave some data for you.”